

BY CHAD LOVE

UPLAND GAMEBIRDS FOREVER

Pheasants Forever's work benefits gamebirds
far beyond roosters, as proven by these 7 examples





Quickly now. Name all the upland gamebird species Pheasants Forever benefits, both directly and indirectly, through habitat work, conservation advocacy and education efforts.

If you said just “pheasants” you’d be wrong. Very wrong.

From the shortgrass prairies of the Southern Plains and the sagebrush steppes of the Interior West to the thick marshes and dense coverts of the Upper Midwest to the piney woods of the Southeast, PF’s impact reaches far beyond its namesake bird.

“We want to be true to our core, but our mission says ‘and other wildlife,’ and we’re thrilled to help other upland gamebirds when we can benefit pheasants and quail too,” says Ron Leathers, public finance director with PF and Quail Forever.

“For example,” he says, “there is significant overlap between the ranges of the lesser prairie chicken, and bobwhite and scaled quail. Our work on prairie chickens and sage grouse creates a lot of crossover that benefits pheasants and quail too.”

These sorts of landscape-level efforts showcase PF’s overall habitat mission, underscoring the idea that the organization isn’t just about pheasants. Here are examples of the conservation cross-pollination that PF engages in across the country.

SAGE GROUSE

These native gamebirds of the western states’ sagebrush steppes are a focus of numerous PF conservation efforts through the Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI), a partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and numerous state game agencies. In addition, PF partners

with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and state agencies on a similar program specific to BLM lands.

Michael Brown, SGI field capacity coordinator for PF, says there are currently several projects in the works that directly benefit these iconic, imperiled gamebirds.

“PF biologists in Washington state have been working with a major private landowner and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to coordinate the development of a conservation plan on roughly 30,000 acres of ground it recently purchased that the private landowner has been leasing,” says Brown. “The state needed to make improvements to the new wildlife area but did not have all the resources. Our SGI staff were able to leverage NRCS and SGI-EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) funds to help keep the landowner working the land and be sustainable while also improving the newly-acquired public ground.”

“The area is critical habitat for sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, chukar, Hungarian partridge, mule deer and many other species,” Brown adds.

The Burley Landscape Project in Idaho is another bright spot of sage grouse conservation, according to Brown. This program seeks to control juniper growth on sage grouse habitat.

“Working with our partners in Idaho, PF biologists have been able to treat 28,000 acres in 7 years,” says Brown. “The project has been so successful that Burley Landscape Project Phase II is set to start next fall. It aims to treat an additional 47,000 acres. These projects will improve habitat for

sage grouse in the area, increase the amount of water within the watershed, and create better-quality habitat quality for all species within the region.”

Other sage grouse projects PF is involved in include wet meadow restoration workshops, which according to Brown are focused on “cheap and cheerful” restoration techniques to increase the amount of vegetation and water on the landscape.

“Participants learn how simple, cost-effective structures can have huge impacts not only on the watershed but the wildlife that depends on water such as sage grouse, beaver, cutthroat trout, salmon, mule deer, the list goes on,” says Brown. “In the West, water means everything. Keeping it on the landscape longer means more habitat for wildlife and better production for farmers and ranchers.”

LESSER PRAIRIE CHICKEN

The Lesser Prairie Chicken Initiative is structured much like the SGI but focused on the conservation and restoration of Southern Plains habitat for these southern cousins to the greater prairie chicken.

Jordan Menge, lesser prairie chicken coordinator with PF and QF, says there are multiple ways in which PF helps enact conservation on the landscape to benefit lesser prairie chickens, as well as other grassland birds.

“One program that has had a big impact on other game and grassland birds is CP38E,” says Menge. “This is a continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) initiative with 10- or 15-year programs. Producers have enhanced their older CRP acres or converted farmland straight to a 9-species plant mix designed

SAGE GROUSE



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LESSER PRAIRIE CHICKEN



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to fit within the shinnery oak ecoregion landscape.”

Menge says the program benefits prairie chickens, and bobwhite and scaled quail.

Another program that producers have utilized for lesser prairie chickens is the NRCS Working Lands for Wildlife program, of which PF/QF is an integral part.

“One of the major threats to our uplands is invasive brush,” says Menge. “Through NRCS there has been major activity with brush management to remove honey mesquite and eastern red cedar, two primary threats to the lesser prairie chicken’s grassland habitat. This brush management has also

benefitted multiple species of quail and other wildlife.”

RUFFED GROUSE, WOODCOCK AND SHARPTAILS

Believe it or not, ruffed grouse and woodcock habitats are also big winners due to PF activities, as are certain remnant populations of certain prairie gamebirds such as a small sharp-tailed grouse population hanging on in east-central Minnesota.

“Pheasants Forever partnered with the Sharp-Tailed Grouse Society to protect key sharpie habitat in east-central Minnesota where that remnant population still resides,” explains Sandquist. “This effort was a combination of

key land acquisitions that were protected and restored, then donated to the state as Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) along with enhancement of existing public land that would benefit not only sharpies, but ruffed grouse and woodcock. We have acquired over 5,200 acres through this partnership to date.”

“All this work includes either adding habitat to the landscape or making existing habitat more resilient and productive,” explains Sandquist. “It connects the dots, creating habitat complexes and corridors that make the collective more beneficial to all game and non-game species.”

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According to Kent Adams, east region director for PF and QF, nearly every type of habitat improvement has crossover benefits to more than just the species for which those improvements are intended.

“We definitely see crossover benefits to woodcock and waterfowl,” says Adams. “And because PF/QF members consist of a wide range of upland hunters and habitat enthusiasts, we frequently use our effective model and programs to deliver habitat results in more than purely grassland landscapes. We know that most of the folks chasing pheasants in the East are also happy to follow their dogs in search of timberdoodles or ruffed grouse.”

According to Adams, PF habitat efforts are often tied

to the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP), which is a watershed-based form of continuous CRP.

“The primary focus of CREP is improving water quality, so most of the conservation practices are installed within flood plain and/or riparian areas,” explains Adams. “Creating grassland and young forest habitat in these often moist, low-lying areas, frequently results in ideal woodcock habitat as well as good pheasant cover.”

“Our Farm Bill biologists and chapters currently work on CREPs in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and New York,” he adds. “In Ohio, the Scioto River CREP provides the most significant source of pheasant habitat in

the state. In Pennsylvania, the Chesapeake Bay CREP is the primary source of habitat in the state’s Wild Pheasant Recovery Areas. There is no doubt woodcock and wood ducks are benefiting directly on those sites.”

Beyond CREP, says Adams, PF/QF Farm Bill biologists also work on wetland restorations through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

“Nearly every wetland restoration includes upland habitat buffers that can be highly beneficial to upland gamebirds such as pheasants, quail and woodcock,” says Adams. “Even the areas that hold water are often drier during the brood-rearing season, and that can be beneficial to upland birds. When inundated,

SHARP-TAILED GROUSE





WHITE-WINGED DOVE

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they provide benefits for migrating and resident waterfowl.”

WHITE-WINGED DOVE

Most PF programs indirectly benefit mourning dove populations. But PF/QF in Arizona helps administer a program designed to help migratory white-winged doves and increase hunter access in the Yuma area, which in turn supports the local economy with dollars from visiting hunters.

“This was a program that Arizona Game and Fish originally started, but is administered by a PF/QF biologist,” says Al Eiden, west region director for PF/QF. “Farms are enrolled into the program, and hunter access is required.”

According to Eiden, the biologist works with Arizona Game and Fish wildlife managers to develop relationships with farmers and implement the program.

“The program helps farmers adjust the timing of grain crop harvest to hold doves in the Yuma area,” says Eiden. “The food provided for doves by this program provides an additional three weeks of forage for birds migrating to



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South America. Doves stay here and hunters come.”

“Initial funding is coming from the from NRCS Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP),” says Eiden, “with future funding for the program coming from local businesses’ donations due to the tourism benefit to the community.”

QUAIL

Aside from pheasants, there’s not a gamebird out there more closely associated with PF than our native quail, especially the bobwhite, whose range most often overlaps with that of the ring-necked pheasant.

Those ties are so close, in fact, that in 2005 PF

created Quail Forever, a sister organization devoted to the same core principles and goals as PF but adapted to the widely-varied regions and habitat requirements of our six native species of quail.

The habitat and conservation work that PF continues to do also benefits quail where their range overlaps with roosters. Perhaps the single largest PF benefit to quail is the organization’s ongoing support of and advocacy for CRP, including the CP33 and CP38 habitat buffer programs that provide crucial food and cover for northern bobwhites and other birds in cropland areas, as well as PF’s increasingly important role in creating pollinator habitat that attracts

the insects young quail chicks rely on as forage.

DESPITE THE NAME, there are no limits to what PF is doing for upland gamebird conservation. Whether you dream of your first sage grouse, pursue prairie grouse on the treeless plains, wander alder thickets in search of grouse or woodcock, venture out for doves or follow a dog in search of midwestern bobwhites, there’s a good chance PF plays a role in making that upland gamebird’s habitat better. ➤

Chad Love is editor of Quail Forever Journal, but he is most definitely an equal opportunity upland bird hunter.

BOBWHITE QUAIL



WATERFOWL

It's not just upland game that benefits from PF's habitat work.

For example, pheasants and cattails go together like peanut butter and jelly. So do ducks and cattails. And all puddle ducks nest in upland grassland habitat. So it's no surprise that many of the programs Pheasants Forever is a part of also benefit waterfowl production while providing public access.

According to Eran Sandquist, Minnesota state coordinator for Pheasants Forever, PF partners with the USFWS and the state's Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) to protect strategic wetland parcels such as Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) across western and southwestern Minnesota.

"These lands are protected, restored by PF, and then donated to the USFWS," says Sandquist. "We have acquired almost 12,000 acres through this partnership to date."

In addition, says Sandquist, PF is working with numerous other partners to accelerate the USFWS Habitat Easement Program, which protects strategic easements on priority private land.

"The parcels are protected with a restrictive habitat easement that only allows managed haying and/or grazing, and any feasible wetlands or grasslands are restored by PF as well," says Sandquist. "The eased land remains in private ownership, but waterfowl realize the benefit. This partnership is just getting started, but we will likely have over 1,000 acres eased within the next year or so."

"Enhancing existing WPA habitat is also a focus," says Sandquist. "PF, OHF and USFWS have embarked on a successful partnership that is making existing public lands as productive as possible. Many WPA acres have been enhanced by restoring wetlands, prescribing fire, seeding with diverse mixes, and removing invasive trees. Ducks and pheasants alike benefit."

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